DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH U.S. AIR FORCE BRIGADIER GENERAL MICHAEL R. BOERA, COMMANDING GENERAL, COMBINED AIR POWER TRANSITION FORCE, NATO TRAINING MISSION- AFGHANISTAN/COMBINED SECURITY TRANSITION COMMAND-AFGHANISTAN, AND COMMANDER, 438TH AIR EXPEDITIONARY WING, KABUL, AFGHANISTAN VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 10:30 A.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 2010

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

PETTY OFFICER WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Hello, I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, March 25th, 2010. My name is MC2 William Selby with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs, and I will be moderating our call today.

A note to our bloggers on the line. Please remember to clearly state your name and blogger organization in advance of your question. Respect our guest's time, keeping questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guest is U.S. Air Force Brigadier General Michael R. Boera, commanding general, Combined Air Power Transition Force, NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan/Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, and commander, 438th Air Expeditionary Wing, Kabul, Afghanistan.

Brigadier General Boera will discuss how the NATO organization has been charged with helping the government of Afghanistan expand and refine its air power capabilities in the Combined Air Power Transition Force.

And with that, Brigadier General Boera, if you have an opening statement, you can go ahead with that.

GEN. BOERA: I do. And good day or salaam alaikum as they say from Afghanistan. I am Brigadier General Mike Boera, the commander of the Combined Air Power Transition Force or CAPTF. So I'd like to thank each and every one of you for your interest in taking the time to dial in this morning for you, this evening for us here in Afghanistan.

And I'm talking to you from Camp Eggers at Kabul, Afghanistan in Kabul.

CAPTF is a NATO organization charged with helping the government of Afghanistan expand and refine its military and police air power capabilities. So I hope I'll have a few comments here, and then through your questions hope to provide an overview of CAPTF's current and planned efforts to grow the Afghanistan National Army Air Corps, or the ANAAC, and the other air power organizations that contribute to Afghanistan's internal security, namely the MOI aviation aircraft.

My goals are to provide a glimpse of the promising development of Afghan air power and to attract the attention of worldwide audience whose members can make important contributions to this team effort.

Much of CAPTF's current membership consists of soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines from U.S. military, but the opportunity and need for coalition partnership continues to grow. Currently, I have Canadian and Czech Republic forces working with CAPTF to provide for the growth and development of the Afghan air forces.

The NATO strategy for stabilizing Afghanistan centers on increasing the size and counterinsurgency capabilities of Afghanistan's army and national police. And air power provides capabilities that enable all of Afghanistan security forces to operate with greater efficiency. For this reason, the air corps will see a corresponding increase in size, and the capability of all nations will be called upon again to help facilitate this growth.

Now, if you have a topographical map of Afghanistan in front of you, and even if you don't, you would notice that the road network overlaid on top of it, you would quickly see why the country is in need of air capability. Urban centers are separated by rugged mountains and expanses of wilderness desert. The roads are in rough shape and don't reach at all into much of the country. And where the are roads, the ongoing insurgency consistently threatens them with improvised explosive devices. There are many areas where you simply cannot go without an MI-17 helicopter or a donkey.

The CAPTF has a unique perspective to observe another academic lesson gleaned from a previous counterinsurgency or COIN efforts. A low-tech approach to air power can have dramatic, positive effects.

We in the Western air forces favor high-tech military solutions. But this approach will not work in Afghanistan. As the school- building mountaineer Craig Mortenson learned in his personal efforts to advance peace, the patience of Afghan culture is staggering by U.S. standards. Sometimes one must listen to the mountains and accept that modest capability built with patience is the most effective way to lead Afghanistan with an enduring capability, and specifically, current operations and training, used airframes, familiar with and well-suited to Afghanistan. And many of these are familiar to our NATO allies.

The current Afghan aircraft inventory includes MI-17 and MI-35 helicopters along with the fixed-wing AN-32 airlifter. And the first two Western airframes, the first two C-27s flown direct from their refurbishment in Italy officially joined the air fleet on 15 November of last year. And Afghanistan now has three of them. And in fact, we flew the first operational C-27 sortie yesterday.

The C-27 will become the backbone of Afghanistan's airlift capability. It offers increased airlift, battlefield mobility and instrument flight capabilities, but it's similar to the AN-32 in its simplicity and ruggedness. And our Afghan partners are comfortable operating it.

In building up capability to employ these airframes, the CAPTF and the ANAAC are pursuing ends that will be sustainable well after we leave.

Now, the greatest challenge in creating a flexible, strategically and tactically capable air force is the issue of command and control or C2. The overarching theme of CAPTF's effort to build the ANAAC follows a theme of shaping institutional processes and an organization culture. Growing future C2 capabilities in the ANAAC will be critical.

Afghanistan's air assets, though limited right now, must become a larger part of the overall air security picture for Afghanistan. This is the same model followed by the other NATO organizations developing Afghan security forces; therefore, we must make C2 structures appropriate for Afghanistan and sustainable by the Afghans as they will inherit sole responsibility for any device structure when the coalition departs, because it's no good to develop a C2 structure they cannot or will not sustain themselves. By training, assisting and mentoring the air corps, CAPTF seeks to create sustainable capacity in four areas. I call them aircraft build or simply the building of available aircraft. Two, airmen build, creating a trained, motivated, talented and professional force of airmen. Three infrastructure build, building and improving airfields and infrastructure throughout Afghanistan. And four, operations, which refers to CAPTF's support of ongoing operations critical to Afghanistan's survival as a nation. Our air advisers fly alongside -- and we say shohna ba shohna in Dari -- with our Afghan partners. I like to say we are literally flying the airplane while we build it.

And a fifth ongoing effort transcends all four of those areas -- institutional development. In building the tangible capacity of the air force, we seek to embed improved institutional processes, command and control functions and a culture of training, interweaving them into Afghan military culture across the four mission areas upon which we focus.

Now, providing aircraft is not enough. An effective force requires skilled and motivate airmen. This is the most difficult and rewarding effort in which CAPTF engages, and it will have the most enduring impact. Efforts span all levels of the air corps organization

with Afghans and embedded NATO partners collaborating on everything from C2 decision-making processes to the best way to load cargo on a C-27.

And CAPTF's mentors offer advice adaptive to the Afghan way of doing business while focusing professionalism and mission accomplishment. I can say, we never accept compromise when it comes to flight safety or corruption. And the more that coalition partners become involved with this mission, the easier it will be to show the Afghans that these values are common among airmen in the world's modern successful air force.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to engage. And I welcome your questions.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, sir.

And I think I heard some more people join us. Anybody else join us?

Q Yeah. This is Sharon Weinberger with AOL News.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay, Sharon, you're third on the call.

Anybody else? Okay, well, Chuck, you can go on with your first question then.

Q Good evening, General, and thank you for taking our call. Chuck Simmins with America's North Shore Journal.

How many people are in the Afghan National Army Air Corps right now? And what is it projected to grow to?

GEN. BOERA: Chuck, currently we sit at just over 3,000 soldiers, NCOs and officers in the Afghan National Army Air Air Corps, and we plan to build to over 8,000 by 2016.

A good amount of them will be added over the next couple of years. We've had a push-it-up attitude enabled to show some demonstrative advances over the next couple of years. It's still very tough. You can't just make airmen overnight. And I'll give you an example.

The first Afghan to complete U.S. pilot training in the last 50 years, it took three years to complete English-language training and pilot training. But he was the first Afghan-qualified C-27 pilot that flew the first operational mission yesterday. So it was an historic day.

So the build is happening. It's on a positive trend. It's currently 3,000 building to over 8,000.

Q Thank you. And how about infrastructure, bases and facilities like that? If the air corps doesn't have its own facilities, or does it share with the rest of the army?

GEN. BOERA: No. One of the four lines of operation that I mentioned that we are engaged on is infrastructure build. And so currently, there are two air wings. First is the corps headquarters. It's at Kabul airfield. And there is also the Kabul air wing there. That build of the specific, you know, the ramp space, the hangar space, the specific infrastructure needed to support an air force, that one's about, I'd say, 75 percent complete.

If you were to talk the grounds of the Kabul air wing, you would not know, without looking over the horizon, you would not know you were in Afghanistan, except for the fact that there's a lot of MI-17s and a lot of MI-35s sitting out on the ramp. Very good facilities, good hangars. There's a simulator that's just as good as any simulator you would find in the United States for the MI-17.

And then we have a second wing that we stood up last October down at Kandahar airfield. Ramp space continues to be constructed. A good hangar is up. A second hangar will be going up as we're going to build up Kandahar. The showcase -- and I say showcase in that it's going to be the enduring training center and also the third air wing for Afghanistan -- will be out at Shindand out to the west. And that's where they will do their indigenous flight training for both rotary-wing and fixed-wing training.

Those are going to be the three main locations. And then we also have air detachments around the country, one up at Mazar-i-Sharif, at Jalalabad, at Gardez and Herat. And then we have air units that are sprinkled across the country, that provide aerial support, fuel and security when helicopters need to land in those areas to support the national population.

So we do separate infrastructure build for the air corps needs. An air force is different than an army.

Over.

Q All right. Just to clarify, the Shindand air wing has yet to be created, but it will be the training center for the air corps.

GEN. BOERA: That's correct. I have captive personnel on the ground there. We have ANAAC personnel that will be showing up any day, literally any day, that will start partnering with my CAPTF personnel. We're going to teach them airbase management skills out there. We're also going to start to bed down airframes out there by the end of this year, and by 2012 is when I'll stand up the third wing there and the training center.

Over.

Q Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Okay, and then we'll move on to Sandra.

Q Hi. Yes, thank you, General. Sandra Irwin with National Defense.

You just mentioned the projected growth for the army air corps from 3,000 to 8,000 airmen. What is the time line for that? And how many airplanes, approximately, do you envision as far as, you know, maybe what categories? And you mentioned a few categories earlier. But in numbers, what are we talking about?

GEN. BOERA: Yes, Sandra. Right now, the air corps currently has 46 aircraft in its inventory. And we will build probably between 130 to 140 in the inventory by 2016.

Q Okay.

GEN. BOERA: I talked about we currently have MI-17s, MI-35s, AN- 32s and C-27s in the inventory. We will add to those fleets to build them up. And then we will be adding a fixed-wing trainer, a rotary-wing trainer and probably a close-air support airframe by around 2013 that will eventually take the place of the MI-35, which currently provides a close-air support capability.

Over.

Q Are these airplanes new airplanes? Or are you getting transfers from the U.S. and other countries?

GEN. BOERA: First off, the airframes, the MI-17s and MI-35s have either been donations from some of the other NATO countries or purchased for Afghanistan from the United States.

The C-27, again, purchased with U.S. funds, but an Italian aircraft is being refurbished in Italy and then provided to us. So it's a Western airframe. It's about a 20-year-old airframe, but it's being refurbished for the Afghans.

We're going to get 20 of those total. So to give you some idea, currently they have very old Russian AN-32s in the inventory. There's been about six of those still flying. Those will be phased out over the next couple of years to be replaced by the 20 C-27s. That will give the Afghans a tremendous capability to transport all of their ground forces into the fight and out of the fight for either rotational purposes for combat or for their culturally sensitive events such as Ramadan, Eid, the Hajj, et cetera.

So between the MI-17s and the C-27s, they'll be self-sustaining to be able to carry their own ground forces and will no longer have to rely on ISAF air or commercial air to help in that effort.

Over.

Q Thank you. And just a quick follow up, are the aviators being trained currently for counter IED surveillance? Or is that mission that currently is not a focus?

GEN. BOERA: That is not a focus for the Afghan aviators. We're focused on supporting the COIN fight by getting their ground forces into the fight.

Over.

Q Do you envision that counter IED training will be a mission in the future? Because that's -- I mean, that seems to be a primary emphasis right now for the U.S. military.

GEN. BOERA: Yeah. You know, I'd be looking in a crystal ball on that one. I'd like to think, by the time that we actually transition the mission to the Afghans, which for us, you know, we're looking out there at 2016 for this, that, you know, peace has broken out in Afghanistan and we're going about a counter IED mission similar to how we're de-mining today across Afghanistan. That's the best I can give you.

It will be a long time, in my opinion. It will be quite a while before the Afghans would have an air capability to be able to do that same type of mission that our U.S. forces are doing today.

Over.

Q Thank you very much.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, sir.

And we'll go on to Sharon now.

Q Yeah, I came in -- I missed a little bit of your opening statement, so I apologize if you talked about this. But I came on when you were talking about, you know, the reason for the MI-17s in Afghanistan. So I was wondering if you could walk us through, why then go with the C-27 for transport rather than buying additional Antonovs. I mean, I don't know the rough numbers, but I've heard some people argue, you know, you could buy Antonov-32s for the price of one C-27 and that it would be easier to maintain. So what was sort of the thought process leading up to the C-27 decision?

GEN. BOERA: A key piece to our growth and development of the Afghan air corps is the professional development of the air corps and also to bring them into more of the global community of airmen.

The pilots of yesteryear in Afghanistan were predominantly Russian-trained on Russian equipment. They were a day of visual- flight-rule-only air force, meaning they didn't fly in weather, they didn't fly much at night.

And the AN-32 aircraft didn't have some of the basic instrumentation that you need in order to fly 24/7/365, if you will, so around the clock. So the C-27 gives that, and we're tying in a GPS system into that because, you know, throughout Afghanistan, it's not like

flying around the United States. There are three airfields out here that have -- actually, there are two airfields out here that have instrument approaches -- three airfields, I'm sorry. And that's Kabul and Bagram and Kandahar.

But we need to go into so many other locations. Eventually, Shindand will have an instrument approach. Eventually, Herat will have an instrument approach. Eventually, Mazar-i-Sharif will probably have an instrument approach. But right now, if you wanted to get into those airfields, you need to depend on GPS capability. And the C-27 will afford it that opportunity to build in that GPS capability. There was no way we were able to do that with an AN-32.

Also, we wanted to make a clean cut, if you will, with their fixed-wing aviation to transition to more Western-style training and capability. And the C-27 affords us that opportunity to do so. And finally, the third and most critical piece of this ends up being the safety aspect. Flying with coalition forces on the airframes and also with the concern for the Afghans' safety, to be truthful, many of the parts were coming harder to come by on the AN- 32, parts that we could actually guarantee were manufacturer standard and not a counterfeit part.

And so that was the decision to go with a modern Western airframe like the C-27.

Over.

Q If I could just follow up on that, briefly. How have you found -- have you had equal difficulties getting parts for the MI-17s in the fleet?

And then I understand the Army recently stood up a program office for non-standard aviation. And I'm wondering if that has helped the situation a bit.

GEN. BOERA: First off on the MI-17 parts, I'd be lying if I said there weren't challenges. But the fact remains that the MI-17 is the most predominant airframe, I believe, that's flying in the world today. There are 77 countries that fly it. And that's not necessarily the case with the AN-32.

So the parts have been easier to come by on the MI-17 side of the house. And we've had good relationship with countries such as Ukraine or Czech Republic that were able to work getting those parts for the MI-17.

And the other thing I'll add is that on the maintenance side of the house, the Afghan maintainers have been phenomenal working the MI-17. I mean, they've been working on this airframe for 30 years, so they do very well with it.

For the non-standard rotary-wing program management office that you speak of, yes, it did stand up. CAPTF, we've been asking for quite a while for some basic program management oversight. Until the non-

standard rotary-wing program management office stood up, we were basically our own brokers, if you will, trying to work through the different program management offices back in the Pentagon to get acquisition, to acquire airframes, to acquire parts, to enable overhauls of airframes that we required.

So it was really hard work from this end. So we appreciate the Army standing up and taking that non-standard rotary-wing aviation program management piece on. And now we're working through what we hope will be a phased approach to what the current Army standard is on some of these airframes and how we go about business in building partnership capacity. In fact, there's a current Army Engineering Directorate team on the ground here in Afghanistan right now that is reviewing all of our procedures that we've had in place and how we have gone about business with training the Afghans to do the maintenance. And it's a tough pill to swallow, if you will, to try to explain, you know, if someone may come to us and go, well, we're a little bit concerned because you don't have Americans doing maintenance on airframes. Well, our job over here is to put ourselves out of a job and have the Afghans do the work and pick up the mission.

And so you have to be able to teach, and to teach you've got to give a little leash. Now, in my opening statement, I also said, we do not compromise safety, so we take it seriously, our overview of the maintenance practices that are in place right now. But the Army's non-standard rotary-wing program management office will be a welcome support to our CAPTF mission.

Over.

Q Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, again, sir.

And with that, does anybody have any follow-up questions?

Chuck?

Q Yeah. Did I take my mute off here?

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Yes, you did. You're good.

Q Okay. Just the MI-35, is that the aircraft that was codenamed the Hind?

GEN. BOERA: Yes.

Q Okay. Why the change in number? Has it been rebuilt or -- it wasn't always called an MI-35.

GEN. BOERA: No, it was an MI-24 Hind.

Q Right.

GEN. BOERA: You know, yeah -- I think it's the Russian export version of the MI-24. So the Russians called it the MI-24 when they had it right here in Afghanistan or they had it in play elsewhere in the world. But an export version flown by another country, it got the designation MI-35 here. Still a Hind.

Q Okay. I missed the number of aircraft that you're going to grow to by 2016. How many? GEN. BOERA: It's going to be somewhere between 130 and 140.

Q Thank you.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: All right. And Sandra, do you have a follow up?

Q Yeah, thank you. General, just very quickly, you mentioned that the command and control is a very challenging task to train and implement institutional processes. Can you maybe explain sort of for the laymen people why that is a challenge and what kinds of things people need to learn in that business?

GEN. BOERA: Yeah. First off, we're trying to teach them to plan ahead. And the Afghan culture and the way they were trained before under the Russian way was very structured, very centrally commanded and oriented and tightly held. And so we're trying to get them to plan ahead, you know, a basic flying-hour program, a basic schedule, that can be termed reliable for the use of the airframes, for the maintenance of the airframes and for what airframes would be available for the COIN effort, what airframes need to be available for training.

They are used to cell phone command and control. They're used to the president or the minister of Defense or the chief of general staff calling the morning of and saying, I want to do this, or we need to do this, and they react to it.

Some of that is warranted in that their biggest concern is internal security. So they don't like planning that far out. They like to keep things close hold and then flex to it. So we're trying to find that balance for them.

And then we're trying to teach them -- because of limited assets, you want to be able to prioritize where you use those assets. Right now, they've pushed some of the assets out to Kandahar, Herat, Mazar- i-Sharif, and that's great. It's closer to the ground corp commanders. But at times, national priorities should trump the local ground corps commander for use of those airframes. For instance, in time of an election or in time of a national disaster, as we recently saw the Salang Pass with an avalanche or floods down in Kandahar where the air corps was put into play to rescue people.

So without a good command and control and a way to command and control those airframes, they would have never reacted to that type of tasking. They would have been there, left in those local areas with the

ground corps commander dictating, I want to use it for this, that or another thing.

We want to support the ground corps commanders -- the air corps wants to support the ground corps commanders -- but it's important for them also to support their national government with the airframes that they have and also to manage those airframes so that they can be sustained and not, you know, basically wear them out before their time.

Over.

Q Thank you. That was helpful.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, sir.

And with that, now that everybody's had a chance to follow up, we're about out of time. So thank you for your questions and comments today to everybody.

And Brigadier General Boera, if you have any final comments, you can go ahead with those now.

GEN. BOERA: Great. I just have two minutes maybe. And I'll just conclude this session with two final historical lessons about COIN warfare.

And the first teaches all of us that small wars are long wars. And that our strategy must acknowledge a chance that insurgency and civil war in Afghanistan may outlast the staying powers of Western government.

The second lesson teaches, some of the best weapons do not shoot. The two observations together suggest that the best investments we can make in Afghanistan are those that allow its people to provide security and good governance themselves after outside involvement runs its course.

Developing security capabilities within Afghanistan, rather than attempting to wear down a determined insurgency from without, is a kind of domestic development. It enables more visible measures like electricity, water, jobs, literacy and education.

If CAPTF can contribute to this goal while increasing broader direct coalition participation, we can combat Afghanistan's internal threat, even as we revive the strength and legitimacy of assisting external coalition.

Now, it is truly a pleasure for me to lead CAPTF and to work shohna-ba-shohna to develop Afghanistan's national security air capabilities. I have a great team, and I am continually impressed by the advances made by the Afghan air forces.

Just this week, we were observing the Afghan start of the solar new year. We put together a pictorial synopsis of what they have accomplished in the previous 12 months. And it is truly impressive.

Now, the online U.S. Air Force publication called The Wright Stuff, like the Wright brothers, The Wright Stuff, they will very soon post this effort. So you can see this presentation for yourself. In closing, I want to thank you all for your questions. And I also want to tell you that I appreciate you helping us get the word out about what is going on with respect to setting the conditions for a professional, fully independent and operational-capable Afghan air force ready to meet the security needs of Afghanistan today and tomorrow.

And as I tell my folks, we'll continue to push it up, aim high and fly shohna-ba-shohna with our Afghan counterparts.

So -- (inaudible) -- or have a good day from Afghanistan.

PETTY OFFICER SELBY: Thank you, again, very much, sir.

Today's program will be available online at the bloggers link on dodlive.mil where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call along with source documents such as the audio file and print transcripts.

Again, thank you, Brigadier General Boera, and to our blogger participants. This concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at this time. END.